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UNCLAS MAPUTO 000201

SIPDIS
E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: SENV EAGR MZ
SUBJECT: 2005 FLOODING IN MOZAMBIQUE - NOTHING LIKE THE 2000 FLOODS

¶1. Summary. Repeated heavy rains inundated central and northern Mozambique in December 2004 and January 2005, provoking floods in late January along the Zambezi river, and raising water levels at the Cahora Bassa Dam to a potentially dangerous level. Many people living along the Zambezi were evacuated in advance of flooding; infrastructure damage and crop loss were reported, but no loss of life directly related to flooding. Water levels have slowly receded below flood alert stage in the past week and people are returning to their homes. Overall national 2005 crop performance is not expected to be adversely affected. Mozambique's wet season continues through March, so the region bears watching for additional heavy rainfall that could provoke futher flooding. Widespread flooding reminiscent of the tragic 2000 floods is not indicated. End Summary.

¶2. Central and northern Mozambique received near-daily rainfall in December 2004 and January 2005, reaching over 60 cm for the two months combined in both Tete and Nampula provinces, with Manica, Niassa, Zambezia, and Sofala provinces not far behind. Rain inundated the Zambezi river, bringing late January water levels in the riverside towns of Caia and Marromeu to 5.93 meters and 5.63 meters respectively, which caused flooding for several days in each district. Flooding was also reported on the Miura and Lacute rivers in Manica province during this time. The Licungo river in Zambezia and the Pungue river in Sofala also reached the flood alert level, but did not provoke reported flooding. During this period the Cahora Bassa Dam rose very close to maximum storage capacity and was discharging water at triple its normal seasonal level in late January. Since early February, however, rain has diminished, waters have receded and by February 8 all rivers had fallen to below standard flood alert levels.

¶3. The Mozambican Red Cross has estimated that about 19,000 families are in need of assistance due to homes and/or agricultural lands damaged by the flood. No flood-related deaths are indicated, although six storm-related deaths were reported. The floods knocked many key roads in Northern Mozambique out of service for several weeks, and also caused the Nacala Corridor rail line to be shut down for over a week due to erosion between Cuamba and Malema. All major road and rail service is believed to be back in operation at this time; it is unclear if infrastructural damage is significant or not.

¶4. This year's rains have elicited a few off-hand comparisons to the devastating floods of January-March 2000 that devastated large swaths of Maputo, Gaza, and Sofala provinces. 2005 water levels remain threatening but show no signs of approaching that tragic level. The 2000 floods killed at least 700 people in Mozambique and forced the evacuation of over 500,000 people, tens of thousands of whom were plucked out of the rising waters by boats and helicopters. The disaster was caused by heavy rains in October 1999 through January 2000, followed by three major cyclones in February and March. Flood waters remained high for long periods of time in multiple major river systems, permanently altering urban and agricultural landscapes; water levels in the provincial capital of Xai-Xai remained four meters high for nearly one month. At this point, the only meteorological similarity between 2000 and 2005 is heavy December-January rains, and even those rains were lighter.

¶5. With two months remaining in the rainy season, post will continue to monitor rainfall levels in the Southern Africa region to assess potential for widespread flooding in central and northern Mozambique. Rain levels in Southern Mozambique will also be monitored, since the region is suffering sub-optimal rainfall which, in the opinion of some analysts, could more seriously hamper 2005 agricultural production.
DUDLEY